

In-Depth Statement and Policy Analysis of Dr. William Polk about Iraq before the U.S. Congress - September 19, 2007

Eight months ago, on January 12 of this year former Senator George McGovern, Congressman John Murtha, General William Odom and I appeared before you here in this room on Capitol Hill. At that time we warned that the situation in Iraq, bad as it then was, would get worse. We four urged that we get out of Iraq with all deliberate speed.

In the eight months since we last appeared before you

- An additional 746 brave American soldiers have been killed;
- about three times that number have been visibly wounded;
- perhaps ten times that number have been "invisibly" wounded including those who have suffered concussions that will debilitate them as long as they live; and
- another \$80 plus billion dollars have been wasted.

All this expenditure of blood and money has given us an Iraq which is more vicious, more hostile to America, less willing to follow our lead and more prone to support violent actions against us now in Iraq and surely in the future all over the world.

Our advice was drowned out by others. You were told to be patient, to avoid any precipitate actions, to stay the course, to vote more money and to sanction a surge in the number of troops America has sent to Iraq.

To at least some of us, these were echoes of Vietnam. Yes, the American public was told, the situation was bad, but another "surge" and more money would do the trick if we only "stayed the course." There were "measurable" successes so there was reason to hope. Indeed, there was light at the end of the tunnel. But, as we learned, the light at the end of that tunnel in Vietnam proved to be the headlamp of an on-coming express, the Tet offensive!

For the last four years we have been told not to listen to the echoes of Vietnam. It was a different war, long ago, and far away; it was not analogous to Iraq, so we must not use it as a yardstick to evaluate Iraq.

Now President Bush tells us that Iraq **is** analogous: But in his August 22 speech, he rewrote the history of Vietnam to justify staying the course. If we don't he said, we would watch the horrors of the

Vietnamese “killing fields.” Leave aside the stunning fact that Mr. Bush and his speech writers did not apparently know that the “killing fields” were not in Vietnam but in Cambodia, a country with which Vietnam fought a war, let us focus on just two of his central arguments:

- First, he argued we should have “stayed the course.” **In fact, we did.** For 4 years after the Tet offensive had showed that we could not win. During those 4 years, while we slowly pulled back, we lost an additional 21,000 young soldiers and
- second, even when we had half a million American soldiers in Vietnam, we were not able to prevent the social revolution that was reshaping the country. When we left, a massive and painful readjustment was inevitable. However, today Vietnam is a peaceful, progressive country and, surprisingly, is friendly to the United States.

The President is right. Vietnam does offer lessons we should have learned, but they are not the lessons he thinks we need to learn. Let me tell you of my own efforts to learn them.

Vietnam was not the first insurgency or guerrilla war I witnessed, but I began to study it in 1962. I was then a member of the Policy Planning Council which opened to me all of the thousands of intelligence and reports coming into our government. When the National War College – now the Defense University – heard of my study they asked me to share with the “best and the brightest” Navy captains, army, marine corps and air force colonels where I had learned. This is the gist of what I told them:

Guerrilla war is made up of three parts that fall roughly in a sequence and could be weighted in impact.

The first component is politics. The insurgents have to establish their claim to speak for their nations. Not only in Vietnam but everywhere such wars have been fought – from our own revolution to Ireland, Algeria, Yugoslavia, Greece and Afghanistan – they do this by opposing the foreigners who rule them. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh so embodied the nationalist cause that President Eisenhower thought he could have won a landslide victory of 80% of a free vote even in South Vietnam.

The second component is administration. The insurgents have to destroy the ability of the government to affect its rule. In

Vietnam, the Viet Cong systematically murdered officials and even school teachers, health workers and agricultural officials to the point that the South Vietnamese government virtually ceased to function.

We see the same in Iraq today. As you know, the investigation carried out by the mission headed by General James Jones showed that the police force we created for Iraq is so dysfunctional that it should be abolished and the General Accountability Office reported just in the last few days what we have long known that the Iraqi regime is hardly functioning. Indeed, only 7 of 18 provinces are even **nominally** under the control of the Iraq government. Incidentally, this was the experience of the Russians in Afghanistan: their chosen government functioned only in the shadow of Russian tanks and aircraft.

These two parts of insurgency, political legitimacy and administrative effectiveness, amounted to about 95% of the total war effort in Vietnam. So even before America sent its first large troop contingent to Vietnam, we had grasped the short end of the lever. What happened from about 1963 to 1973, the fighting, was only for the last 5%.

So I told my 1963 War College audience that we had lost the war.

They were no more receptive to this logic than many of our senior officers are today.

So we plunged ahead, "surging" from a few thousand when I spoke to half a million; we used every trick and every weapon we had. But despite glowing press handouts – coining such phrases as we hear again today, "more time was needed," "We must stay the course," "We were near success," "the South Vietnamese government was taking charge," and "there was light at the end of the tunnel,"; things did not improve.

To convince us that it had improved, President Lyndon Johnson brought back our military commander, General William Westmoreland, to reassure the Congress and the American people. He cut a fine figure with his medals and stars, was popular with the press, and what he said was very reassuring. With charts, graphs and other lecture room paraphernalia, he advised us that the Viet Cong were on the run, their soldiers were sick and discouraged, their numbers had fallen by about 15%, they were "almost starving to death" and about half of

their main forces were "no longer combat effective." Victory, he said, "lies within our grasp and "the enemy's hopes are bankrupt." We were entering the phase of just mopping up the defeated remnants of the Viet Cong. He overawed the Congress and the public but unfortunately the Viet Cong were not listening. It was only two months later that they struck Saigon in the Tet offensive.

Today, I don't see anything quite like the Tet offensive in Iraq, but I also do not see anything like the war General David Petraeus so graphically portrayed.

What is really happening in Iraq is very different from the sound bytes and photo-ops that pass for news and analysis.

The bottom line is that force, even massive force, is not working. It never does. In fact it manufactures enemies because the relatives, neighbors and friends of the victims seek vengeance and the place to get it is in the resistance.

So the numbers of insurgents grow and as some are killed or imprisoned, others take their place. The war goes on. Force does not work.

General Petraeus admits that and offers us another way to fight the war, through counterinsurgency.

Counterinsurgency sounds impressive, even mysterious, but it is not new. We tried it in Vietnam and it did not work for us; it didn't work for the Russians in Afghanistan either. We both tried the whole range of techniques. In Vietnam we put virtually the entire population -- about 7 of 10 Vietnamese in some 6,800 barbed wire-encircled strategic hamlets, assassinated or imprisoned thousands of suspected guerrillas, obliterated whole areas with a massive bombing and defoliating campaign, etc. In short we used the whole range of counterinsurgency techniques. What was the result? Listen to what the editors of the *Pentagon Papers* said about it in Vietnam: "Our "program was, in short, an attempt to translate the newly articulated theory of counterinsurgency into operational reality. The objective was political though the means to its realization were a mixture of military, social, psychological, economic and political measures...The long history of these efforts were marked by consistency in results as well as in techniques: all failed dismally."

But we often act as though what we see today in Iraq is unique. When reporters and officials draw analogies, like President Bush did, they are

often wrong.

So now General Petraeus, with much fanfare, tells us that counterinsurgency is the answer in Iraq. But even he admits that it is not the central issue. What he says, and I quote, is that

“Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate.”

If this is true, and I agree that it is, can we do it? The short answer is no, we cannot. No insurgency in modern times has been defeated by foreigners because, in our age of politically conscious people, natives refuse to be ruled by foreigners. Thus, in Iraq today, 8 in 10 Iraqis want America out and believe it is legitimate to attack our soldiers to get us to leave.

What about just arming our local allies? Should we not just create an Iraqi army as we did in Vietnam? And let it do the fighting – and the dying.

In comparison to Iraq, South Vietnam had a world class army; many military men, speaking privately, today describe the Iraqi army as a bad joke. Neither army wanted to do what armies are supposed to do, fight. And both armies, to be generous, are lax in what they do with the arms we give them:

Putting in more arms, as we should also have learned in Vietnam only better equips the insurgents who seize them or buy them. In Vietnam, it was first France and then America -- not Russia or China -- that armed the guerrillas.

When I first went to Vietnam in 1963, one could buy even an American tank on the Saigon black market. The Viet Cong stopped using Russian equipment because American arms were easily available. We furnished, by way of our local allies, the bullets that killed our troops.

In Iraq today, as the press recently reported, we have imported huge numbers of Russian AK 47 assault rifles to arm the police and army. Now we have learned that 190 thousand weapons have simply disappeared. General Petraeus was in charge of training and equipping the Iraqi Security forces before taking overall command, but he does not know (or so he told Congress) what happened to them.

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Our great American satirist, Ambrose Bierce, once joshed that war is God's way of teaching Americans geography.

We spent a long time in this school: We Americans have made nearly 200 wars, but the Roper-National Geographic 2006 survey showed that we have not been good students. After four years of the Iraq war, six out of ten Americans between 18 and 24 could not even locate Iraq on a map – almost none could they tell who lives there, what language the Iraqis use or what religion they follow. The numbers are a bit better for Germany or France but far worse for Afghanistan or Somalia.

As H.G. Wells warned us, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." If he were alive today, he would see that we are skating close to the edge of economic, political and foreign policy disasters.

Even in colleges and universities throughout America, I find astonishing ignorance on these issues. Do they matter? Yes, Thomas Jefferson told us, because "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free," he said, "it expects what never was and never will be."

Speaking for myself, I admit that we teachers have let the nation down.

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Clearly we need all the help we can get. But, Congress is not stepping up to its Constitutional duties to lead the nation and to avoid the worst that was inherent in this disastrous venture and to work intelligently, constructively and effectively toward a much better and far safer future. To be fair, at least some of the blame is yours. In a democracy like ours, you, our Congressional leaders, must also be our teachers.

Demanding yourselves to know the facts, **guiding** us, your constituents, to understand them and then **enacting** wise legislation is surely why we elect you.

These actions do not come from looking back at the polls; they come from leadership.

When I was in military training I was taught that leadership comes from the front, not from behind. That maxim is also directed at you,

the Congress: If you do not lead the public to understand what you are privileged and entitled to learn as members of this great institution, our country is in grave danger.

But, I am constantly told that Members of the Congress do not take the responsibility of teaching, of guiding, of leading their constituents. As you know, respect for the Congress has hit an all-time low with about 4 in each five voters saying that they disapprove of the performance of this Congress.

Unfortunately, few citizens realize how difficult it is for the members of Congress to stand up against the President on National Security matters, even amidst an unpopular war and occupation. But you should take some heart from the fact that when Senator Fulbright stood up on Vietnam, he became a major world figure. So there are compensations for courage. I hope you will find them.

You have kindly afforded me time today to discuss what you can – and should – do. I will try to be brief.

First, I urge you to go back to your constituencies and help them find the facts. If they live in a dream world, hoping for miracles, relying on clever gimmicks, listening only to sound-bytes and being out of touch with reality, they will surely be overwhelmed, as the whole country was after Vietnam, by a wave of disillusionment.

Such a wave of disillusionment would be a major psychological setback for our country and perhaps especially for you as, mistakenly blaming you, they may vote you out of office.

So we teachers – you and I -- should be pro-active, taking action to help our fellow citizens come to grips with reality and move toward sensible, hard-headed actions. That is, to act just as your constituents would if they faced a serious danger to health. And that is exactly what we Americans now face, a serious danger to our nation's health.

Second, I urge you to demand to know what *really* is happening. You are a newly empowered majority in this Congress. You need to be much tougher in rooting out the truth. Digging out the facts and sorting through misinformation is hard for reporters, but you, as members of Congress, have the power to demand the facts and the experience to evaluate them. We rely on you to do so.

Third, you must think ahead about what we can do. The “buck” really does stop with you. It was the Congress that forced the Johnson and Nixon administrations to come to grips with the reality of the Vietnam War; today, this task is up to you. You have the constitutional right and obligation to do it.

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So let us turn to the most dangerous and most urgent task. It is deciding what to do about Iraq.

Today, **our country is faced with three options among which you must choose.** They are:

- ⌞ **stay the course,**
- ⌞ **cut and run** or
- ⌞ **help the Iraqis to solve the terrible problems they face.**

Let me briefly analyze these options:

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The first option is to stay the course. Everyone, even those who pushed us into this war and General Petraeus more recently, now agree that using massive fire power and sending more troops to Iraq has not worked. The “surge” is not a coherent strategy. It is a tactic. It has been destructive of our national purpose and has tarnished our national image.

In Vietnam, in fact, we “stayed the course” for nearly 16 years. We lost 58,226 American soldiers dead and were responsible for the deaths of about 1 ½ million Vietnamese. At the end, we withdrew in a humiliating fashion. The scene of Americans literally beating back our Vietnamese allies from a helicopter while we took off to safety from an embassy roof was the image of America seen round the world.

We do not have any strategy that offers us a way to avoid that humiliating end to our Iraqi venture.

Thus, what we are told is a statesmanlike, prudent, rational and conservative policy, giving our efforts more time, will only make certain that, **as in Vietnam, when we are finally forced out, we will face not “victory” but humiliation.**

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The Second option is what the President and his supporters have called “cut and run.”

Rightly, everyone worries what will happen if we do.

But, let us be clear: a precipitate withdrawal will not, as some self-proclaimed experts have said, **create** chaos – **Iraq is already chaotic.** – but it will **leave Iraq in chaos.**

Our 150,000 troops and massive military power have not stopped the daily mayhem. Even our expensive and much publicized fortified Green Zone is almost daily bombarded. About 3 million Iraqis have already fled their homes. Over 2 million have even fled their country.

Iraq today is like Afghanistan was under the Russian occupation: a non-functioning society without a home.

Every day that the occupation continues will make recovery more difficult.

Is recovery possible?

During the American Revolution, one of our early statesmen, James Otis, sounding like President Bush, warned that if the British left, “America would be a mere shambles of blood and confusion.”

As we know, it didn’t quite happen like that. In America as in other guerrilla wars, once the foreign intruder was gone, the natives began to sort out their own affairs. This is what happened in Ireland, Algeria, Yugoslavia, Kenya and elsewhere. **Natives could do what foreigners were totally incapable of doing – they and they alone could stop the insurgency.**

Of course, social and political reconstruction does not happen overnight and is not automatic; moreover it often involves great suffering. We should do everything we possibly can to avoid this.

Some have argued that the way to do this in Iraq is to divide the country.

They are dreadfully wrong.

If **Americans** tried to do this, hatred for America would grow even more bitter. Iraqis do not want to split up their country. Hundreds of

thousands more people would be ripped out of their homes, schools, jobs, and neighborhoods because the population, particularly in the cities, even after these dreadful years of violence, is mixed.

Worse, we would have created in Iraq **a new Balkans** which could be the seedbed of future wars.

If we cut and run, the Iraqis themselves may create such a colossal tragedy.

We should try to help them avoid it.

So, what can we do? The short answer is act intelligently.

What does acting intelligently involve? That takes us to our Third Option.

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Our Third Option is to get out of Iraq on an orderly schedule sufficiently rapidly to convince the Iraqis that they must pick up the pieces and implement a carefully constructed program that will help them to do so.

This is the operational plan embodied in H.R. 508 introduced last January by many of you here, many elements of which were laid out by former Senator George McGovern and me in *Out of Iraq: A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now*. (published by Simon & Schuster in October 2006.)

Still the only available plan, this legislation lays out in detail how to accomplish withdrawal with the least possible damage to American interests and to the Iraqi people; it contains cost estimates, a timetable and evaluation of success in a fully integrated and mutually supporting series of actions that, taken together, *could save thousands of American lives and American taxpayers upwards of \$350 billion.*

This is not just speculation and I am not an armchair theorist: for 4 years I was in charge of planning American policy for the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. I have written several of the basic US national policy papers and participated in writing many more. I know what planning requires and have put what I have learned into the effort on Iraq. What I have done is not perfect. No plan ever is. But this plan has sensible, cost-effective and productive elements that

interact to provide a framework for a future with which we and the Iraqis can live in safety and even in prosperity.

So what does the plan call for? Here I can outline only a few points. H.R. 508 is readily available on-line and full prose rationale for it is available in our book, *Out of Iraq: A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now*.

But in short, consider just five key steps:

→ **The first step is to replace our military force**, with a “multinational stability force.” It should not be imposed upon Iraq but should be employed by the Iraqis. This force should not try to fight the insurgents but to create and maintain an acceptable degree of stability.

Stability will not be perfect. The key word is ***acceptable***.

But the history of insurgencies teaches us that once the major irritant – the foreign occupation – is removed, the natives themselves will demand and achieve order. What happens is simple and obvious: when the general population feels that enough of its objectives have been accomplished, it stops supporting the insurgency; when that happens the fighters, the actual insurgents, lose their legitimacy and their support. As Mao Tse-tung put it in his 1937 study of guerrilla warfare, the “fish” lose the “sea” that sustained them. The insurgency then dies, often very quickly.

So the multinational national stability force is intended to help bridge the gap between the withdrawal of the Americans and the coalescence of the Iraqis.

This task, of course, is harder today than it would have been two years ago and will be much harder two years from now. But we believe it should be **achievable in an acceptable fashion in about two years at a cost of about \$6 billion – or about 2 percent of what we will spend if we stay there.**

→ **The second step is the creation of a national police force.** The danger is that it will be little more than a hit squad for the majority to be used against the minority. That is what Iraqis believe the one we have created now is. That is what your mission of inquiry also found.

To avoid the danger of it being used for violent, sectarian purposes, it must be counter-balanced. This can be achieved in part by the multinational stabilization force but also by what is traditional in Iraq - neighborhood, village and tribal home guards.

→ **Third** we should **stop encouraging the growth of an Iraqi army** on which we have already spent about 19 billion dollars.

Until Iraq rebuilds its civilian institutions, an army is a danger to all Iraqis. Iraqi armies, even long before Saddam Hussein, have been the seedbed of dictators and the cause of national disruption.

We should redirect the billions of dollars we are spending to create an army into creating what **Iraq really needs, something like our Corps of Engineers** to help rebuild the country. Only if jobs are created can the devastating level of unemployment be reduced.

→ **The Fourth step is a series of actions** to convince the Iraqis that we really are leaving their country. To do this,

- We should **immediately stop work on military bases** – which the Iraqis believe proves that we intend to stay;
- We should **stop using and paying the armies of mercenaries** – now the second largest military force in the country. They are the “loose canon” of Iraq – out of all control and supervision. They are a major threat to American national interests and reputation;
- We should avoid actions that suggest that we intend to hang on to the one significant **national economic resource of Iraq, its oil**;
- We should turn the vast and expensive Green Zone over to the Iraq government, and replace it with a far more modest American embassy; and
- **We should close the vast prisons** we have created. They now hold some 25,000 Iraqis who must either be released or tried.

→ **Fifth**, we should offer all the help we can muster to **the growth of civic institutions, professional societies and grassroots organizations.**

This is a far more complex and long-term process than the previous steps.

You might compare it to reeducation after surgery: without it, Iraqi society will never recover from the trauma of the war and occupation.

But, this is a field in which we have not only much experience but also many talented people and existing organizations. We can encourage our great foundations, universities and professional societies to interface with existing and competent Iraqi educational, public health and development authorities.

There are several other elements in our plan which will reinforce these basic actions. They are spelled out in detail in H.R. 508 and our related book, but these, we believe, will go far toward stabilizing Iraq and beginning the necessary work toward recovery.

In monetary costs, the whole program we have set forth might cost roughly \$12-14 billion.

Implementing the program would **save**

- the lives of perhaps a thousand or more Americans and far more in incapacitated or walking wounded;
- about \$350 billion in direct costs,
- **perhaps \$1 trillion in indirect costs,**
- **it would staunch the hemorrhaging of respect and good will for America throughout the world** and
- finally, it **would do far more than any police measures to reduce the danger of terrorism.**

Failure to implement the program will cause tragic losses across the board to our country. The American public has told you it wants you to act! Waiting is not action. Delay will be costly and painful.

- **You have seen what happened since Senator McGovern, Congressman Murtha, General Odom and I appeared before you last January.**

- **If you do not act, by the time of the next election, the 736** American soldiers killed in the last 8 months will be followed by at least that many more and the 60 or so billion dollars wasted will be followed by 3 or 4 times that amount. We are likely to suffer terrorist attacks here at home and to lose even more of the good will and respect we have labored so hard for so many years to garner. And you can be sure that the American public will be angry and disillusioned.

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You in Congress are America's first – and last – line of defense.

America's future is in your hands. The buck stops with you.

So I end by echoing our great statesman-educator, Thomas Jefferson: "let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty and safety."

Thank you.

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